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**"WE NEED TO GRAB POWER WHERE WE CAN": TEACHER  
ACTIVISTS' RESPONSES TO NEOLIBERAL POLICIES DURING THE  
CHICAGO TEACHER'S STRIKE OF 2012-2013**

**ABSTRACT:** In the midst of neoliberal governance and policies of privatizing public education in the U.S., to what extent do the voice, emotion, body, and resistance of a teacher matter? This project considers the experiences of teachers as they develop a critical consciousness and attempt to resist the neoliberal practices that are dismantling public education and omitting teacher voice from educational matters. Utilizing Giroux's (1983) conceptual frame of "critical consciousness" and additional frameworks around neoliberal governmentality in educational settings to situate the study (Rose, 1996; Rose & Miller, 1992), this article draws on ethnographic field notes and interviews to showcase how teachers protested, organized, and agitated against local educational policies. Emphasizing interviews with three teachers, the author considers the purpose of public education from teacher perspectives as well as teachers' motivations for speaking against policies of neoliberal governmentality (Foucault, Rabinow, & Rose, 2003). Implications from the study speak to how we might reframe teacher resistance in order to resuscitate democratic education and political action as part of teachers' work.

*Introduction*

Sitting in a coffee shop on the South Side of Chicago, a teacher from a nearby high school pondered the Chicago teachers' strike in the fall of 2012. He said, "Strikes are times of raised consciousness." As our interview progressed, I learned of his views on teacher professionalization, resistance, and recovery from the persistent assault on teachers' work through budget cuts and school closures. Through the ethnographic study of teacher resistance in Chicago, this article highlights teacher voices and new forms of resistance in the context of neoliberal ideologies and practices in our current educational environment.

The Chicago teacher's strike in 2012 and the teacher resistance that seems to have emerged from it opens up larger theoretical questions about teacher consciousness and resistance. In addition, the unique Chicago context laid the groundwork for, and was similar to, global and national movements and experiences of teacher resistance. First, affronts on teachers' work and the resulting protests from teachers occurred when Wisconsin governor Scott Walker banned collective bargaining for public employees, and more recently signed legislation that makes Wisconsin a Right to Work state (Green, 2015). Second, films such as *Waiting for Superman* paint vivid, often negative aspects of

public schools and teachers’ work while promoting neoliberal reforms, charter schools, and choice models. Third, the media continues to play a significant role in framing the discourse on public school teachers (Goldstein, 2011). Given the national US and local Chicago instances of “assaults” on teachers’ work and the “globalizing force of neoliberalism” (Ball, 2003, p. 217), this project considers how public school teachers in Chicago engage in and articulate new forms of resistance and agency in a neoliberal governance era (Lipman, 2011; Mausethagen & Granlund, 2012).

The article primarily argues that neoliberalism and its system of governance limits the conditions for the teaching profession while giving birth to new articulations of teacher agency and resistance. Theoretically, this paper examines how the neoliberal discourse sets the conditions for possible action for teachers. Using the data from the ethnography, I illustrate how teachers disrupt neoliberal discourses, reforms, and practices, resulting in new forms of agency and resistance. The significance of this research is it provides us new and interesting ways to consider what a model of teacher resistance could look like, and how consciousness, democracy, and relationships are manifest in teacher resistance. Empirically, the data from ethnographic observations and interviews with teachers offers new insights into how teachers disrupt and potentially escape the current constraints on the profession. The research contributes to scholarship in the sociology of education and urban education policy, and more broadly to the theoretical conversation about the effects of neoliberalism on the everyday lives of teachers. Finally, this research signals that teaching is more than just relying upon content and skills; it is deeply informed by notions of critical consciousness of its surrounding political context, notions of democracy, and foundational relationships.

### *Theoretical Orientation*

Neoliberalism appears in many discussions of contemporary social theory and its application to education. This article draws on concepts in social theory such as neoliberalism and ‘consciousness’ in order to deepen our understanding of teacher resistance in a neoliberal era and to ask questions about new forms of agency within the current constraints on the profession. First, I define neoliberalism. Next, I offer a new lens with which we can understand its relationship with teacher resistance. Last, I offer a definition of critical consciousness as a way to think about teachers’ voices and articulations.

Scholars including David Harvey (2005) argue that neoliberalism is a set of political and economic ideologies and practices. The framework for neoliberalism rests upon a belief in individual freedoms and skills advancing in society through free markets and free trade. Neoliberal ideology has been applied to and used as an analytic framework in education (for example, see Fabricant & Fine, 2012). Lipman (2011) similarly draws on Harvey (2005) to define neoliberalism as strategy of the state to facilitate opportunities for capital accumulation at the risk of increasing social inequality. Lipman applies neoliberal ideology to education by helping readers think about the ways in which public social goods such as education, and public sector employees and unions are subject to privatization. I build upon Lipman’s work here to consider neoliberal ideology as a discourse from a post-structural perspective – i.e., a set of language, policies, practices and their effects – and the ways in which it sets up the conditions of the current teaching profession. I argue that neoliberal discourse seems to be a mentality of the times in which teachers live and work – what post-structural social theorist Michel Foucault (2003) has called a neoliberal mode of governance that permeates society and regulates the population.

Moreover, new post-structuralist analyses of neoliberalism deepen our understanding of the process of changing social structures and social relationships, and the mentalities of both government and the relations among the social body (Ball, 1999, 2003; Donald, 1992; Roberts & Peters, 2008).

Informing this conception of neoliberalism, then, is Foucault’s concept of governmentality. Foucault, Rabinow, and Rose (2003) argue that neoliberal governmentality is:

The ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses, and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security. (p. 244)

To elaborate, the corporate model of educational reform (e.g. charter proliferation and school closures in cities such as Chicago) and the weakening of public employees’ work constitute the complex apparatus of power where individuals and institutions are subject to procedures such as value-added analysis and performance evaluation. Additionally, procedures include bias testing practices, monitored by “technocrats” rather than educational experts (Tyack & Cuban, 1995), and district-wide privatization in cities such as Chicago and New Orleans post-Katrina. The current corporate reform models in education utilize discourses of “choice” that on the surface seem valuable for members in society. A post-structural lens applied to neoliberalism allows us to see the shifting ideologies that actually seek to marginalize and exclude members of society (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998) and the ways in which the corporate model of reform sets the conditions for teachers’ work and seeks to oppress the profession (Fabricant & Fine, 2012).

Given the context of neoliberalism and its impact on public education, this project considers how teachers might disrupt neoliberal ideology by developing a critical consciousness and engaging in social action. Giroux (2014, 2015) has argued democratic spheres are in crisis as neoliberalism gains currency in the U.S., and that we need to see neoliberal modes of power in public school districts in order to consider how to resist them within the constraints of neoliberal ideology. The concept of “critical consciousness” provides a useful lens to help make sense of teachers’ awareness during and after the strike. Giroux (1983) argues that critical consciousness is:

The mode where we highlight the normative basis of all knowledge and to point to the active nature of human agents in its construction. The critical aspect of that process represents a reflexive understanding of the interests embodied in the process itself and how these interests might be transformed, challenged or sustained so as to promote rather than repress the dynamics of critical thought and action. (p. 154)

Teachers in this study express that resistance occurs through the ideological struggle between teachers and reformers such as Mayor Emanuel and the Chicago Board of Education. This raised consciousness is a type of self-awareness that is not merely a “mystified consciousness” (Gramsci, 1975). Giroux and others (e.g., Hinchey, 2004) argue we must see the possibility of transformation through political awareness and social action. But, transformation begins by understanding ourselves in a socio-political context, and teaching students about the process of social and cultural reproduction. Aligning these principles of critical education with teacher experiences in this study help reframe teachers’ work as intellectual and recognizes the central role of political knowledge and action in their work.

In what follows, I first provide the brief context for the Chicago teacher’s strike. Second, I provide the data collection and analysis procedures. Third, I discuss three key findings. Last, I offer implications for a new model of teacher resistance emerging from the data.

### *Context and Methodology*

#### *Context: The Chicago Teacher’s Strike of 2012*

The social and political context matters considerably in critical ethnographic research because an underlying tenet of this methodology is to study, expose, and critique oppressive structures in order

to advocate for social change (Creswell, 2005; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Recently, scholars have written about a seemingly global assault on teachers and their subsequent movements of resistance (Fujiwoshi, 2013; Lipman, 2011) and the significance of the Chicago teacher’s strike as a social movement (Uetricht, 2014).<sup>1</sup> This article builds on much of this research by documenting teachers’ experiences of the strike and how it enabled new forms of resistance and articulations of consciousness, democracy, and relationships.

This important context shaped my research study of teacher activism. One of the teachers, Mr. B, said to me, “We [teachers] need to grab power where we can,” meaning the strike brought teachers together to also transform social and educational inequalities. He further noted:

We’d been in school for about a week before the strike happened. We had current students [walking with us]; we had former students; we had so many different levels of support; it was tremendous. What a powerful narrative! I think for a lot of us picket lines were academic things that you’ve read about. The sense of solidarity allowed us to see the things worth fighting for. For our students, for the schools they deserve. For the education we believe they deserve. We believe these are the things necessary to get the education for our students we know they need and deserve. We can strike, but we can also join in the movement. (Interview, May 28, 2013)

The comment provides the context for teacher activism as it emerged during and beyond the strike. He and other teachers expressed a desire to contribute to reshaping public discourse on teachers and executing a new vision for teacher activism. Teachers wanted to “advocate for broader issues in education like providing better schools to low-income kids” and “critique the national assaults on education” as part of their expression of resistance in Chicago (Interview, May 28, 2013). The data here provides insight into the ways in which the context of the teacher’s strike, in part, enabled teacher resistance to emerge.

#### *Methodology: Educational Policy as Social Context for Critical Ethnography*

The data were collected as part of a larger a critical ethnography between 2012-2014 in Chicago public schools. The design of critical ethnography enables the researcher to consider the “voices of marginalized populations” in larger oppressive structures (Foley, Levinson, & Hurtig, 2000; Levinson, Foley, & Holland, 1996; Madison, 2012; Noblit, 1999; Quantz, 1992; Villenas & Foley, 2011). Weis and Fine (2004) argue that the critical ethnographic method seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their daily lives in the context of histories of marginalization, oppressive conditions, and structural inequalities. Given the social and political context mentioned above, I explored teachers’ responses to policies of privatization in public education and school closures in the Chicago context through interviews and field observations to understand their perspectives. Thus, the research documented the emerging mode of resistance to the conditions set up by neoliberal practices.

#### *Data Collection Procedures and Analysis*

The data were collected through 1100 hours of participant observations in classrooms, after-school programs, field trips, youth organizing and meetings with teacher allies from multiple public schools, protests, rallies, and service trips across the city, state, and U.S and teacher interviews. I analyzed the field notes and interviews for emergent themes and developed a paradigm for what teacher resistance could and should continue to look like.

From the data, I provide the rich stories of three teachers: Mr. B., Mr. Sage, and Mr. Shepherd (all pseudonyms).<sup>2</sup> The teachers in this study provided a range of teaching and organizing experience

and demonstrate how the strike and issues of inequality impacted teachers’ work. Each interview transcription was coded in multiple stages for themes aligned with the conceptual framework of critical consciousness or like terms, such as: self-awareness, Gramsci’s (1975) notion of common sense, emotional dimensions of teaching or relationships, and visions for democratic society. Follow-up interviews and conversations occurred throughout the 16 months of the study and codes were modified to reflect on-going analysis of data and updated perspectives of teachers.

From the data analysis, the themes that became the central story for this article were related to how teachers “pushed back in micro ways” (Interview, December, 19, 2012), and were further connected to self-awareness and critical consciousness development (theme one), teacher-student relationships (theme two), and democracy and the purpose of public schools (theme three). I argue that these themes offer insight into new modes of teacher resistance.<sup>3</sup> To elaborate, as the critical consciousness develops for the teacher (and subsequently for his or her students through the pedagogical relationship), then the teacher—with an emerging critical consciousness—can enter into and maintain a pedagogical relationship with a political purpose. I argue the result of this relationship is relational-emotional work that is central to the role of teacher. Last, the teacher generates a transformative view of democratic society. The teachers in this study connect the power of teacher-student relationships for transforming democratic society and reengaging with what it means to see the political in teachers and students’ everyday lives. One teacher referred to this generative power of pedagogical relationships as part of thinking about “the creation of a ‘public’ through public education” (Interview, August 18, 2013). In this framework for understanding teacher resistance, we see resistance as an expression of democracy.

### *Findings*

*“Strikes are times of raised consciousness, but we need to continue to resist”*

Mr. Shepherd’s quote above provides insight into some teachers’ beliefs that the strike contributed to teacher critical consciousness and suggests that resistance is an on-going process. The themes that emerged from the data related to teacher sense-making about the strike and the politics of Chicago education. I argue that each of these themes from the data be framed as a form of teacher resistance. The implications of this framework for teacher resistance call for a need to consider critical thinking about policy, politics, and teachers’ work, conceptualizing relational-emotional dimensions of teaching in more productive ways, and to resuscitate democratic theory in education as it applies to teachers’ work.

When I asked teachers what they thought resistance ought to look like, I expected to hear them say something about a union organized strike or a large-scale protest as if a single moment signaled resistance. Mr. Shepherd, said:

Education is a subversive activity; subversion is limitless. We [teachers] don’t need to be radical to fight or to have a dramatic moment, but we need to be competent. But, strikes are times of raised consciousness and as we think about how to move forward—how to resist—we have to become aware of the systemic attack on education (Interviews, June, 3, 2013).

The statement captures a theme across the interviews that I argue is a piece of teacher resistance. This teacher expresses that a strike provides important fodder for thinking about the politics of education and also that teachers need to engage in an on-going process of developing awareness about the policies and practices that negatively impact education and teaching. The dimensions of critical consciousness emerging from the data include: neoliberal policies that negatively impact teaching; the union and its limits: knowledge of the history of the teaching profession.

*Teacher resistance as critical consciousness and political knowledge*

In each of the interviews, teachers expressed a desire to know about the deeper systemic issues in educational reform, structural problems related to the union, and to recognize the feminized social status of the profession of teaching (i.e., a lower status as a profession, Lortie, 1975). The recognition of these things constituted a set of knowledge necessary for developing critical consciousness.

Further, teachers in the study were aware of what aspects of the history of the profession connected it to a working class, lower status profession. Kerchner and Koppich (2007) argue that “teaching carries with it some of the organization assumptions of jobs in the manufacturing sector” (p. 350). Teachers such as Mr. Shepherd expressed that an understanding of the teaching profession as connected to the manufacturing sector is part of the knowledge that teachers need to possess. For instance, Mr. Shepherd argued, “All members of the union should have basic knowledge of the profession and its history because teaching is a low-status profession” (Interview, December, 19, 2012). Mr. Shepherd felt that an understanding of the history of the profession, specifically that teaching has historically been a low-status profession, is important so that teachers understand their marginalized position in society. He discussed this understanding of teacher marginalization as a first step toward transforming teachers into leaders in education. He believed that teachers should not allow the district’s policies to alienate them from the work of education that they engage in everyday—work that matters to children’s lives.

In addition to teachers needing to understand teaching as a low-status, “semi-profession,” and the negative effects of neoliberalism, Mr. Shepherd believes that understanding the union (and its limits) is central to teacher resistance (Ingersoll & Perda, 2008; Lortie, 1975). Mr. Shepherd further articulated that the history of labor relations and organizing are relevant for public school teachers in a city like Chicago and serve a greater movement toward change rather than just relying on the union and its collective bargaining role. He told me during several interviews that a strike is one moment in time, and that a continued inquiry into how teachers can resist was important to express agency and fight systemic attacks on public education. As Mr. Shepherd said, “we need to be aware of the systemic attacks on education if we are to resist” (Interview, June 3, 2013). He said that teachers across the city wanted to learn about and advocate for improved structures in education, but that would have to happen beyond the “moment” of the strike.

A third component of Mr. Shepherd’s “raised consciousness” idea arose when teachers like Mr. B. discussed awareness of himself in a larger social context, the movement of deskilling teachers’ work, (e.g. over-testing as an example of a neoliberal practice), and shifting policies of standardization. Drawing from the data, I argue that teachers must understand the networks of power that operate and seek to de- professionalize and deskill them from their work. Mr. B. noted:

Testing is a really good example of the ways in which we are de-professionalizing teachers’ work in this corporate reform era. They purport to reduce holistic relationships we build with students to data points. I have some friends involved in various teacher activist groups that have started the hashtag #evaluatethat. We all have our stories about how we inspire disciplinary knowledge into our students, but ultimately when a student comes to talk to me before or after class, or after they graduate, that’s evidence that my work matters, not de-professionalizing us to make us into robot test-givers. (Interview, May 28, 2013)

The strategy of this teacher was to resist the “reductionist view of education” that “de-professionalizes” teachers’ work through building relationships with students. This action on the part of Mr. B. speaks to the negative impact of neoliberal policies and practices, e.g. over-testing and reducing teachers’ work to a transaction between student and teacher in that he counteracts it with his strategy of building and strengthening his teacher/student relationships.

The acts of recognizing the history of the teaching profession’s low status, understanding the position of the union, and realizing the negative impact of neoliberal reform, are part of developing a critical consciousness that will help teachers begin to understand themselves as potential agents of change. This awareness is crucial as they are to advocate for change. For many teachers, political activity is mostly equated with participation in the union. Each of the teachers discussed their knowledge of and role in the Chicago Teacher’s Union as part of their development of a critical consciousness.<sup>4</sup> Participation in the union, however, was not the only way teachers defined consciousness and political activity. For instance, Mr. B. noted, “the union helps teachers arrive at a voice of advocating for themselves and their students” (Interview, May 28, 2013), but during the “de-form era of education,” teachers needed to continue to resist through persistent social action (Interview, June 3, 2013).

The teachers in this study understood part of their role was to engage in political activity. However, their conceptions of the teacher-activist identity did not mean only participating in a union or a protest. Rather, their conceptions of teacher-activist identities are aligned with larger, intellectual visions. For instance, Mr. Sage describes his development of a critical consciousness about the teaching profession and education:

The other source and interest in being a public school teacher is definitely the more...I don’t know if you would say like sociological or political or philosophical justification, but when I was in college I got into studying philosophy and political theory, and over time it just developed into the personal conviction that democratic theory was useless if you didn’t talk about education. I came to the idea that education was so important in the political sphere and the creation of what I naively hope would be just a better country and a better world. I think of education as being just so totally central to this idea that we have of like “The American Experiment” and democracy, and just creating like frankly a far more fair, equal, just, joyous society. It really can’t happen without teachers who are committed to making it happen. (Interview, August 18, 2013)

This teacher’s development of a critical consciousness about education and the teaching profession is interconnected with his understanding of democratic schooling. This teacher also had a desire to become a public school teacher in order to address issues of inequality in society. A second component of Mr. Sage’s critical consciousness is an understanding of his role, in part, and responsibility as a teacher. When asked what he felt the most important thing he could do for his students was, he replied:

The most important thing I can do as a teacher is to help students see themselves as good learners and as not like—bad learners, or deprived, or deficit-ed or with a deficit: however you wanna say it, but to see themselves as good learners, as agents in control, good question askers to the point that if they wanna learn anything, if they wanna do anything, they can do it. Whereas before they just don’t even know...kind of how I felt when I started teaching. I just didn’t even know what I needed to know. When you teach someone to be a good learner they can find out on their own. I think that the most important role a teacher has is as a guide of sorts. (Interview, August 18, 2013)

For a teacher to be able to guide a student, he or she has to understand the cultural deficit mode of thinking that dominates views on urban education and low-income communities (e.g., Rodriguez, 2015). Each of the teachers articulated components of critical consciousness, centering on an understanding of educational policy issues, corporate, neoliberal policies and the union. All of these things comprised the knowledge that these teachers argued was part of their development and necessary to their potential to advocate for change. Next, I discuss the role of relationships and the ways that teachers value relationships as a key mode of resistance during neoliberal times.

*“In this [de]form era of education, relationships are what matter”*: Relational-emotional work of teaching as a component of resistance

Repeatedly, teachers in this ethnography proclaimed relationships are what matter in education, and relationships were crucial to resisting the testing and audit culture that dominates public schools. They believed that teachers should value and dignify students, particularly in low-income schools where students arrive to schools having experienced inequality and marginalization.

Previous scholarship on teacher-student relations (conceptualized as supportive relationships with high- status institutional agents such as teachers and community organizers) argues that relationships matter in low-income schools (Stanton-Salazar, 2001) because they provide low-income students with access to social institutions and positive role models (Ainsworth, 2002). Such exposure can also offset negative neighborhood effects on achievement (Owens, 2010). Additionally, scholars have noted the positive impact of teacher-student relationships, particularly when teachers have knowledge of cultural backgrounds and demonstrate “care” for students (Valenzuela, 1999). For example, Valenzuela’s (1999) study of Latino immigrant students observed that if teachers made an effort to understand students’ socio- cultural contexts, then students would recognize this as a form of authentic caring and in turn feel connected to school. Further, Valenzuela documented teachers’ caring work as containing sincerity and an active understanding of students’ cultural backgrounds and suspending judgments of students’ styles, preferences, and tastes even if they are different from white, dominant cultural norms.

As Mr. B. noted above, he believes the current focus on testing and the school closing policies in Chicago has devaluing consequences on teacher-student relationships. He shared that “relationships are what matter,” when one actually understands teacher’s work, suggesting that cultivating relationships functions as a form of resistance because to outsiders of the profession, growth from relationships is not quantifiable.

Unequivocally, Mr. B, Mr. Shepherd, and Mr. Sage see relationships with their students as connected to a larger political purpose and democratic vision for society. They highlighted the problematic ways in which schools cannot or do not value positive relationships due to a focus on testing and accountability. Below, is an overview of teachers’ responses to the issue of the relational-emotional work, and then an elaboration and analysis of the responses.

*Table 1*: Thematic data: Relational-Emotional Work of Teaching

Teacher Name:

Mr. B “We [teachers] use this hashtag #evaluatethat. We mean those student teacher relationship moments, that we know are really powerful. We know relationships are the reason why students are going to be a more holistically developed, engaging young person entering society. The evaluation process that exists at present is so driven by ideologies that go against relationships” (Interview, May 28, 2013).

Mr. Sage “You can always try to build relationships with your parents and with your kids and you can use that vehicle, whereas without that, you are at the risk of being extremely disadvantaged to advocate for reform in education policy” (Interview, August 18, 2013).

Mr. Shepherd “In this [de]form era of education, relationships are what matter” (Interview, June 3, 2013).



These teacher responses each connect with the larger social and political context that sets the conditions for their resistance. Mr. Shepherd made this point by saying, “relationships matter” in the “de-form” era of education. This point was echoed by Mr. B. when he noted teachers were resisting the dehumanized testing approach in schools by using the hashtag #evalutethat to refer to the deeply meaningful relationships they build with students and how such relationships increase student belonging to school and often increase achievement.

Further, the climate of privatization hovers over and constitutes the social body of how discourses on teachers’ relational-emotional work can arise (Zembylas, 2005). That is, to discuss teacher’s relational- emotional work is to say that teachers’ emotions are embodied in a set of social conditions and practices that generate emotions. Zembylas (2005) argues that teachers’ “emotions are embedded in culture, ideology, and power relationships without ignoring embodied aspects of emotion” (p. 19). Zembylas’s post-structural understanding of emotion helps make sense of teachers’ understanding of relationships experienced by Mr. B., Mr. Shepherd, and Mr. Sage because the social conditions and practices set by neoliberal ideology fuel and ignite the emotional responses of these teachers and strengthen their desires for productive and positive relationships as a form of resistance.

The data revealed that teachers’ relational-emotional work was also political work that structures the experiences of teachers. This means teachers’ perspectives on the importance of relationships were influenced by, to some extent, the ways that the educational milieu was attempting to remove an emotional component from their everyday lives by only evaluating performance based on testing. Teachers are negatively impacted by neoliberal policies, but they continue to build and maintain relationships. This, according to teachers here, is a form of explicit resistance in the context of neoliberalism. Regardless of how testing and school closures objectify and commodify public education, teachers refuse to be teacher-robots that only execute educational transactions through testing.

The relational-emotional work of teaching connects with a larger vision for reform in education policy. Each response from Table 1 above posits relationships matter despite the negative impacts of the current neoliberal “de-form” era that complicates and oppresses nurturing relationships. Additionally, Mr. Sage highlighted that relationships are “absolutely central” and that teachers and students have to “trust each other” in order to accomplish anything. He said:

I want to be a progressive educator, and a teacher that guides and learns from students. You just need to look students in the eyes and come from a place that you know whatever you’re helping them with or providing them with is what they need. And that was kind of powerful to me, to recognize that [pauses] there’s the ability to say, “Oh it’s all relationships man” in like a kind of noncommittal, floozy type way. But then there’s a way to say it, where it’s like “Wait, hold up, this is *actually*...if you combine the relationships with the total commitment and knowledge of your students and your role as a teacher to transform yourself, your students and society,” then that is powerful. (Interview, August 18, 2013)

The unique aspect of teachers’ views of relational-emotional work advances our understanding of teacher- student relationships by arguing that these relationships not only matter, but that they are pedagogical in the Deweyian (1954) and Girouxian (1983) senses whereby the pedagogical relationship acknowledges the political dimension of our everyday lives. The relationships are also complex in that they are made, maintained, and sustained by the teachers’ knowledge of the social-political context, and the emotional ecology of teaching.

Finally, teacher-student relationships are not limited to classrooms and the transaction of teaching and learning. Rather, the relational-emotional work of teaching and the pedagogical relationship

connects to a larger democratic vision for society. This necessitates our re-conceptualization of teachers’ work as intellectual and political and also emotional. The next section considers the ways teachers in this study articulate a vision for democratic society as a form of resistance.

*“The use of education to create a public”: Teacher resistance resuscitates democratic education.*

The third theme in the data that emerged was teachers’ desire to articulate a democratic vision for schooling. In times of privatization, neoliberal structural forces, and unelected school boards in districts like Chicago, it seems lofty or grand to think back to Dewey’s vision for democratic society and social action. Yet, teachers in this study connected their development of critical consciousness—the insight into the relational-emotional work of teaching, where emotional work is embedded in a set of power relations—to a larger democratic purpose for schooling.

As such, Mr. Sage said in one of our interviews, “How can we resist? Well, we do it micro ways everyday and also we have to think about how to use education to create a public” (Interview, August 18, 2013; July 28, 2014).<sup>5</sup> As teachers like Mr. Sage contemplated their role as public educators—a piece of developing a critical consciousness—they ascertain the socio-political context of education and the need to engage in meaningful pedagogical relationships with students in order to challenge inequality. A return to Mr. Sage’s vision for a democratic school and informs what he views as a challenge to equality. He said:

If anything it has solidified and enlarged the ideas I already had about democratic participation and the role that education plays in creating a public. Real democracy cannot happen without knowledgeable and willing participants. This is an idea from Dewey and from Neil Postman. One of the purposes of public education is to create a ‘public’ that knows how to participate and cooperate in democracy. My teaching in a high-needs public school has really only made me believe that teaching should not be value-free, and that value-free or un-political education is actually quite political. Our students should be taught what is needed to be compassionate human beings. I would argue that the values that they see in popular media, the values they internalize, are not the values needed for a vibrant democracy. School, then, needs to counteract these values and present alternative visions of what could be. If anything, my teaching in a public school has made me hyperconscious of the question: What is education for? And though the answer is not settled for me, it is some mixture of being for us, for autonomy, and for a better world. (Interview, April, 13, 2014)

Mr. Sage argued that the primary duty of education should be to create a democratic society. Quoting educational thinkers such as Dewey and Postman, he reflected upon the ways in which low-income communities and local Chicago public school students, families, administrators, and teachers are very removed from school policy conversations happening in the city. We discussed how public school teachers, youth, and community organizers attempted to talk back to the mayor about school closings and attempts to further de-professionalize teachers’ work.<sup>6</sup> In the face of structural inequality (e.g., charter school proliferation), teachers need to resist. The influx of allowable charter schools in Chicago creates a competitive market for schooling and, in effect, stratifies schooling by setting up a system of winners and losers in public education. Teachers like Mr. Sage observe this inequitable system and believe part of their work is to advocate for a more equitable system.

Additionally, Mr. Shepherd contemplated the connection between the everyday lives of students and teachers in order to elucidate how teachers can materialize articulations of democracy through the relational-emotional work they do. He said:

One assignment I always do, and this connects to your questions about democratic schooling, is I have kids in my high school social studies classes interview a family member. Most students end up interviewing an adult immigrant. We talk about the kinds of jobs that are available for immigrants and the people in their communities. Students learn about employment, and they come into class with some data. We think about, “how do we fit into the nation?” So, that’s good for social studies. That’s good pedagogy. That’s good teaching, but it’s also good politics. So that’s my thing, how can we stretch this example and fit it into the bigger world. (Interview, December 19, 2013)

Mr. Shepherd’s approach to social studies courses helps students connect their family’s experiences to the economic structure in society and enlightens students’ views of labor and education. His understanding of teachers’ work is explicitly political. His belief in proper labor conditions and helping students understand the historical and economic conditions from which their experiences are situated stems from his own background, which includes an understanding of the socio-political context for teaching. He explained:

My basic position on teacher resistance and activism comes from before I was a teacher. I worked in factories and my political background is not one that looks for a central power leader for us all to rally around, but rather emphasizes power in the grassroots or power on the factory floor. We want a strong union; we want strong workers capable of representing and fighting for themselves. The enemy is passivity. We cannot be passive and expect change. But, one way to resist is to fight for a different vision and to know what we want our end product to be, in terms of what we’re going to teach our students and how we’re going to treat them as individuals and collectively, and that’s a form of resistance. That doesn’t solve problems around wages and benefits, and even having a job, which is where a lot of the damage is being done right now to teachers. You can be sure that the people on the other side [the mayor and the district] are very interested in breaking the collective powers and the teachers over their working conditions (Interview, June 3, 2013)

Mr. Shepherd and the other teachers consider a “different vision” for education as the “creation of a public” through public education. Focusing solely on workers’ rights and the role of the union as the only form of activism and resistance fails to account for a vision of public schools that fight for democracy and the creation of the public. Instead, teachers’ ideas here reflect the important forms of resistance necessary in neoliberal times. These components of resistance include: critical consciousness, the emotional dimension of teacher-student relationships, and the belief that schooling is a vehicle for the creation of a public.

### *Implications*

Returning to the ideas set forth in the conceptual framework, this section considers the implications for re- conceptualizing teachers’ work through the lens of “critical consciousness,” which is one component of resistance, along with the emotional work of teaching and returning to a vision of democratic school that has been suffocated by neoliberal policies and practices. The data revealed the various ways teachers resist and exercise agency in the neoliberal context. To this point, Giroux (1983) argues that critical consciousness is the mode when teachers call into question the ways in which knowledge is constructed, and/or how their fields of knowledge and work are governed. Once we consider the ways in which knowledge is produced through particular sets of power relations and conditions, we learn how to disrupt normative paradigms. For example, teachers like Mr. Shepherd understand the relevance of the teaching profession’s history and its low status, the uses and limits of unions, and that teachers need to return to ideas of democracy to protect the profession from the policies of privatization impacting public schools. Mr. Sage recognizes the power of school to

actually create citizens that are “compassionate human beings,” that can “cooperate and participate in a democracy” (Interview, July 28, 2014). Knowing these things will enable teachers to exercise power and agency by demonstrating the intellectual, emotional, and political work embedded in the teaching profession. These articulations of new visions for democracy generate a “different vision” for education, and teachers need to fight for this different vision in the face of large scale, systemic attacks on public education.

A second point about teacher resistance that emerged during the Chicago teacher’s strike is the realization that teacher resistance is a fluid, iterative process that informs their work as public school teachers that serve in high needs schools. To focus solely on the moment of the strike would miss the web of power relations operating to de-professionalize teaching and to privatize public education. Each of the teachers commented on how they need to continue the fight, and continue the work to ensure that equality in education is secured. The narratives documented the thought process of teachers as they experienced the strike, moved beyond it to take up issues of inequality, and engaged in what became a social movement to save Chicago schools from the district’s closure policies and larger educational inequities.

The “critical” dimension of the consciousness that was raised in these teachers’ lives refers to the need for individuals to learn the process itself, how to transform accordingly, and to begin challenge the process if it fails to serve the needs of those central to it. In other words, teachers are a central agent of social change in a democratic society and ought to be involved in the creation of a public through dialogic relationships with students as well. The key implication of conceptualizing teachers as intellectuals that develop a critical consciousness is that we can observe and characterize teacher resistance in new ways. To extend our understanding of teacher resistance, I argued that we as educators and researchers need to consider teachers as intellectuals, and to merge the political with the pedagogical. What, then, does teacher resistance look like? In the spirit of promoting teacher voice in this article, I turn to Mr. Sage’s reflection of resistance. He explained:

Teacher resistance looks like teachers thinking critically about what they are teaching to their students (both implicitly and explicitly) and why they are teaching it. A very first act of resistance is to ask yourself questions about what you are doing with your students. It all starts with caring enough to deeply consider how you spend your time with your students. It is then up to other teachers, and ideally, principals, [and] schools districts to consider it. These are the questions: What am I going to teach my students today? What’s it good for? How do I know? I am nearly certain that if a teacher starts asking herself these questions, we will get valuable resistance. It seems that things are so decentralized, that teacher resistance, meaningful teacher resistance, is not going to come from the top. Resistance, then, comes from motivated teachers, connecting first at their grade level, then at their school, then going outside their own school to connect and share with parents and communities. It must come from teachers talking to teachers. If the teachers are open and honest about their struggles and successes, and talk about what they believe education is for, resistance and teacher autonomy will happen. I really deeply believe that we have to talk about what education is *for*, and it’s for the creation of a public. We are part of creating that public. (Interview, April 13, 2014)

Teacher resistance needs to include the individual’s development of a critical consciousness and an understanding of the socio-political context of education, the relation-emotional work where emotion is characterized as situated in a socio-political set of conditions and practices, and a vision of democratic society. Aligned to this, Giroux (1983) argues, “radical intellectuals provide the pedagogical and political skills that are necessary to raise political awareness and to help develop and engage in collective struggle” (p. 151). These narratives from Mr. B., Mr. Sage, and Mr. Shepherd showcase examples of teacher resistance, which have implications for student-teacher

relationships, teacher preparation, and educational reform as teachers offer a critical perspective of underlying school problems (e.g., ideological, political, and material conditions that structure schooling and inequality) and reclaim their position in society as “a force of social change” (Counts, 1978).

Rethinking teacher resistance, emphasizing teachers’ sense-making processes on these issues, and reconsidering that relational-emotional work is embedded in a set of social practices and power relations are steps toward putting value back into the teaching profession. Additionally, recasting teacher resistance to include a connection to intelligent social action is important if we envision an improved status of the teaching profession. Giroux (1983), drawing on Dewey, once again is useful in reminding us of the importance of recognizing the politics of everyday life that inform teaching and learning. Giroux argues that Deweyan philosophy influences the ways in which we understand the social body and public intellectuals, such as teachers, as having a role in generating and preserving social discourses that improve the lives of human beings. Specifically, Giroux says that Deweyan thinkers consider:

The politics of social individuality in which the imperatives of democracy could be sought not only in the schools but in all pedagogical sites that recognized the primacy of the political in everyday life. Beneath the logic of this position was an emphasis on the relationship between knowledge and power, doing and acting, and commitment and collective struggle. (p. 159)

Much like the voices of Mr. B., Mr. Sage, and Mr. Shepherd, the imperatives of democracy need to be recalibrated as part of teachers’ work and as part of teacher preparation. Teachers need to gather knowledge both in course work and experience, and use it to inform their practice and social action.

### *Conclusion*

Using the narratives of three particular teachers, this research documented insight into the ways in which teachers make sense of neoliberal policy constraints on the profession and resist discourses about educational policy and the profession of teaching. In addition, the research demonstrates the ways in which teachers can disrupt the process of corporate, neoliberal ideology through their new articulations of raised consciousness, relationships, and the purpose of schooling in a democracy. The implications of considering these realizations as a new and unique form of resistance lead us, as Hargreaves (1998) and others have argued, to consider the emotional work of teaching and the brand of resistance necessary to function in today’s neoliberal control over public educational settings. This means teachers need to have a space for dialogue about the politics and relational-emotional dimensions of teaching and they need for their voices to be heard. As agitators and resisters to corporate reform models that seek to alienate teachers from teaching, attention to the emotional ecology of teaching and to the power relations embedded in the socio-political context that influences the profession can drive strong teacher-student relationships where teachers and students are working together to resist.

This article also suggests that it is not enough in our current educational reform climate to point out that neoliberal ideology exists and is operating. Community schools are closing across the country and charter schools are opening, so teacher organizing and resisting needs to continue to fight against the neoliberal practices of school districts such as the ones throughout Chicago. The article argues that observing and documenting the voices and experiences of teachers in local contexts can provide foundational knowledge for mobilizing teachers facing similar assaults on their profession without devolving into a political charade between equally problematic bodies of government in the teachers’ unions versus local districts. Instead, the article suggests that we consider Giroux’s (2014) comment that “these new modes of power have to be understood in terms of their limits and

strengths and challenged accordingly not as an act of reform but as an act of revolution—a going to the root of the problem in order to create strategies for fundamental social, political, and economic transformation.” This transformation begins with teacher activists’ examples of how to organize, agitate, and resist in order to change our perspective on reform.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For example, Gutstein and Lipman (2013) have noted how the strike occurred in response to the district’s attempt to dismantle public education and undermine democracy. Additionally, Fujiwoshi’s (2013) argues, “The CTU strike represents a force of people who were willing to take a stand and fight for quality schools that function under dignified working conditions. Chicago represents a workforce of educators who believed in the power of the people” (p. 104).

<sup>2</sup> A brief note on sampling: I chose them because they were dissimilar from each other: they ranged in age (24-60), teaching experience (first year teacher to veteran teacher of 15 years), socio-economic background, prior work experience, and prior experience with activism (from no experience with activism to a history of labor organizing and protesting).

<sup>3</sup> Additionally, these modes of resistance within this framework are interconnected and iterative. This is to say that teachers did not experience one moment of critical consciousness, then realize the relational-emotional dimension of teaching, and then articulate a vision of democratic schooling in society. Rather, teachers throughout the study and throughout interviews constantly were raising awareness about educational policy issues and constantly negotiating spaces to express sense making about their role as teachers in high needs/low income public schools.

<sup>4</sup> Mr. Shepherd and Mr. B. were heavily involved in union leadership (Mr. Shepherd as a delegate for the building and Mr. B. as a delegate by the end of the study).

<sup>5</sup> This idea of “using education to create a public” was an idea that developed over several months for Mr. Sage. In our first interview, he brought this up, and I returned to this quote with him in subsequent interviews because he said he needed more time to define and develop what he meant by it.

<sup>6</sup> Scholars such as Ingersoll and Perda (2008) have argued that one of the reasons the teaching profession maintains a fairly low-status in relation to other professions (e.g. doctors, lawyers, or engineers) is that the professional indicators of the profession are not as stable. For instance, they offer seven indicators of a professional model, and when issues like “easy entry” (Lortie, 1975) or a lack of prestige are part of teacher’s work, they maintain a low status. In other words, privatization policies and increased charter school presence in cities like Chicago enable alternative certification programs such as Teach for America to gain entry into the profession without a strict path or advanced credential, and this is what Ingersoll and Perda would say contributes to the de professionalization of teacher’s work.

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